

“Jafnan segir inn ríkri ráð”  
*Proverbial Allusion and the Implied  
Proverb in Fóstbrœðra saga*

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*Fóstbrœðra saga* is remarkable in its textual and literary-critical history as an object of several long-standing and generally inconclusive debates. The date of its most original, consciously composed form, and how that form is represented by its varied extant witnesses, are questions of primary interest. Agreement upon these matters would inevitably influence if not determine the resolution of a secondary problem: the point of the saga itself, its moral and ethical focus, its thematic force. However, in the absence of any foreseeable unanimity of opinion regarding questions of textual identity and origin, it might be helpful to search for the meaning of this saga by a purely internal method, using a phraseological approach to its texts, considering the value rendered them by proverbs and allusions to proverbs that can be seen to inform individual but crucial episodes of the narrative as a whole. Specifically, this paper is concerned with ways in which the traditional Old Icelandic proverb “Jafnan segir inn ríkri ráð” (The more powerful always decides)<sup>1</sup> is arguably illustrated and identified by allusion in *Fóstbrœðra saga*, imbuing that narrative as a whole with a paroemial force that embeds it in the communal wisdom of the saga’s original audiences.

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1. See Samuel Singer, ed., *Thesaurus Proverbiorum Medii Aevi*, 13 vols. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1996–2002), henceforth TPMA, 4:460, and the *Appendix* below. For extensive attestation of this medieval proverb in Icelandic sources, and for proverbial materials in *Fóstbrœðra saga* generally, see also “Proverbs and Proverbial Materials in *Fóstbrœðra saga*” in my online *Concordance to the Proverbs and Proverbial Materials in the Old Icelandic Sagas*: [http://www.usask.ca/english/icelanders/proverbs\\_FBRS.html](http://www.usask.ca/english/icelanders/proverbs_FBRS.html).

## 1

Textual discussion of *Fóstbræðra* first became complex in the 1930s, initiated by Vera Lachmann's observation that the Hauksbók version (ca. 1300) had some of the same stylistic features found in what had previously been assumed to be interpolations in the saga as it occurs in the obviously later Flateyjarbók (ca. 1400).<sup>2</sup> Thus was first called into question the traditionally held assumption that Hauksbók comprised the simpler and more authentic version, with the fuller saga, and its oddly floreate passages, combined as it is in Flateyjarbók with *Óláfs saga helga*, as a later and expanded redaction. Lachmann's views were developed further by Sigurður Nordal in the commentary accompanying his 1943 edition of the saga, with predictable reactions in succeeding decades when scholars noticed in Hauksbók what they took to be the relatively late stylistic features of the once presumed interpolations of Flateyjarbók, by this time generally accepted to have been expurgated from the now derivative Hauksbók.<sup>3</sup>

## 2

Jónas Kristjánsson's detailed meditation *Um Fóstbræðrasögu*, with its various evidence for a later thirteenth-century date of composition, sees the stylistic peculiarities of the text as not inconsonant with features of the learned style of Old Icelandic prose, which in the fourteenth century came to be marked by florid style.<sup>4</sup> Of special pertinence to this paper are his conclusions regarding the first chapter of *Fóstbræðra*, an episode in which Grettir Ásmundarson is saved from execution at the hands of some poor farmers in Ísafjörður by intervention of the aristocratic Þorbjörg digra Óláfsdóttir pá, who rules the district when her chieftain husband, Vermundr inn mjóvi Þorgrímsson, is absent from home.<sup>5</sup>

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2. See Vera Lachmann, *Das Alter der Harðarsaga*, Palaestra 183 (Leipzig: Mayer & Müller, 1932), 222–23.

3. See Sigurður Nordal, "Handrit. Aldur. Höfundur," in *Vestfirðinga sögur*, ed. Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson, Íslenzk fornrit 6 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1943), lxxii–lxxiii.

4. See Jónas Kristjánsson, *Um Fóstbræðrasögu* (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1972), 251–91.

5. *Ibid.*, 81–82.

The story is omitted from the otherwise longer Flateyjarbók redaction but occurs in its related manuscript, *Membrana Regia Deperdita*, as well as in *Möðruvallabók*, whose text, with that of *Hauksbók*, is seen by Jónas Kristjánsson as deriving from a source different from that of the former two books. The fragmentary witness to *Fóstbræðra* in *Hauksbók* makes it impossible to know if it contained this episode of Grettir's narrow escape from hanging. Formerly regarded as an inexplicable interpolation indebted to chapter 52 of *Grettis saga*, the passage was now granted undisputed textual authenticity by Jónas Kristjánsson, who argued persuasively that the borrowing had worked in the other direction.

Earlier views of the Ísafjörðr episode's spurious existence at the start of the *Möðruvallabók* text were justified by its apparent irrelevance to anything that followed in the saga, since Grettir himself appears in it later only as a peripheral figure. However, the test of narrative consistency or coherence in medieval Icelandic literature has been shown to rely on more than mere linear progression. Ian Maxwell's study of *Njála* introduced a critical concept that seems useful here: “the principle of the integrity of episodes.” “Sagas prefer to deal with whole episodes, not pieces or aspects or reflections of them.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, the whole story of Grettir's brush with death forms the first chapter of *Fóstbræðra saga*, in its entirety seeming irrelevant to the story that follows, unless one takes into account Maxwell's corollary of this concept, the “partial independence” of episodes. That is, although such scenes are recounted in a way that renders them whole in themselves, they are also part of the extended composition in which they occur: “Is there not also a rhetoric of narrative by which, without explicit comment, the author may keep his readers on track?”<sup>7</sup> The process of reading such episodes, then, involves seeking their thematic unity with the text in which they are embedded rather than attempting to place them in a logical and linear progression of narrative.<sup>8</sup> Let us

6. Ian Maxwell, “Pattern in *Njáls saga*,” *Saga-Book* 15 (1957–61): 25.

7. *Ibid.*, 26.

8. Maxwell's observations are similar in their critical impact to those of Adrien Bonjour, whose classic study of the digressions in *Beowulf* demonstrated how, separate and independent in themselves, they nevertheless can be read for the establishment of value in the main narrative in which they are embedded. See *The Digressions in Beowulf*, Medium Ævum Monographs 5 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1950). Further to this, Jonathan D. M. Evans argued that the episodic character of medieval narrative cannot be studied



consider how the Ísafjörður episode, now generally accepted as part of the original text of the saga, can be read for its preludic value in a thematic rather than linear sense.

Such an undertaking has in fact already been accomplished by Giselle Gos in an essay concerned with certain women in *Fóstbræðra saga*, whom she takes to be presented by the composer as wise mediators between outlaws and society—Grettir on the one hand, and the *fóstbræðr* on the other. Thus, Gos would see the preludic quality of chapter 1 in *Fóstbræðra saga* as constituting “the comparison between the foster-brothers and Grettir, their relationships to the communities, and the need for mediators in those relationships, as well as the large part women play in that social mediation in Iceland.”<sup>9</sup> For Gos, the point of the saga is in part “the degree to which the women’s roles in mediation parallel King Óláfr’s.”<sup>10</sup> This careful discussion of portions of *Fóstbræðra* seems to touch upon a theme of interest to the composer of the saga. However, I will consider here the possibility that a shift in emphasis in our reading of elements of the first episode might suggest that the saga’s composer had concerns of a broader and more comprehensive perspective than Gos has envisaged, and that these concerns are more clearly traceable through a wider range of the narrative.

A comparison of this episode with its presumably derived counterpart in chapter 52 of *Grettis saga* shows that the situation of Vermundr and his wife is established more fully in *Fóstbræðra*. In addition, as the wise and stately woman takes up her viceregal duties on this occasion, she does so having first learned of the impending event at home, rather than more or less stumbling upon the gallows scene as she does in *Grettis saga*. Furthermore, in the latter saga she argues against his execution on the grounds that “executing Grettir will be more than you men of Isafjord can handle, because he is a man of renown and great family, even though fortune does not favor him” (*ofráð mun þat verða yðr Ísfirðingum, at taka Gretti*

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productively in Aristotelian terms; this episodic tendency gives “evidence of the cultural patterns creating and sustaining them and investing them with meaning.” “Episodes in Analysis of Medieval Narrative,” *Style* 20 (1986): 128; see also 134.

9. Giselle Gos, “Women as a Source of *heilræði*, ‘Sound Counsel’: Social Mediation and Community Integration in *Fóstbræðra saga*,” *JEGP* 108 (2009): 288.

10. *Ibid.*, 298.



*af lífi, því at hann er maðr frægr ok stórættaðr, þó at hann sé eigi gæfumaðr*).<sup>11</sup> Clearly, the primary rationale of her statement asserting her authority in *Grettis saga* is that Grettir, like Þorbjörg digra Óláfsdóttir pá herself, is of aristocratic background and that he is more than they can handle, both physically and socially. The rather comical scene prior to her entrance upon it has already demonstrated the incompetence of the captor farmers, with each excusing himself on ridiculously flimsy grounds from the responsibility of holding the dangerous *skógarmaðr* captive until Vermundr returned from his trip to the Alþingi. Nothing in this text shows Þorbjörg explicitly imposing her will upon the farmers—rather, modeling herself as a protective ruler of the neighborhood, she sternly extracts a promise from Grettir to cause no more trouble and take no vengeance upon his captors. Showing excessive restraint, he agrees and is immediately released.<sup>12</sup>

Þorbjörg's role is different in *Fóstbræðra*, where the outlaw's privileged family background is also mentioned. Here, though, she adds, “His kinsmen will take his death badly, even though he is regarded as overbearing by many” (*mun frændum hans þykkja skaði um hann, þótt hann sé við marga menn ódæll*), calling attention to likely repercussions that could extend beyond his captors' control if they go through with the hanging. In response to her assertion of authority, “His life will not be forfeit on this occasion if I have any say in the matter” (*Eigi mun hann nú at sinni af lífi tekinn, ef ek má ráða*), they reply, “Right or wrong, you have the power to prevent him from being executed” (*Hafa muntu ríki til þess, at hann sé eigi af lífi tekinn, hvárt sem þat er rétt eða rangt*).<sup>13</sup> Gos sees as most important here the fact that “the verb used to describe Þorbjörg's

11. Translations of the sagas, unless otherwise noted, are from Viðar Hreinsson, ed., *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, 5 vols. (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson, 1997), henceforth CSI, here: 2:131. The Icelandic original is cited from the *Íslenzk fornrit* editions (see Bibliography), here: ÍF 7:169, ch. 52. Page references to the aforementioned editions apply to all subsequent quotations from the same until otherwise indicated.

12. For a perceptive psychological study of Grettir, see Robert Cook, “The Reader in *Grettis Saga*,” *Saga-Book* 21 (1984–85): 133–54; “Reading for Character in *Grettis Saga*,” in *Sagas of the Icelanders: A Book of Essays*, ed. John Tucker (New York: Garland, 1989), 226–40. The importance of familial background and social class to Grettir's motivation is elucidated in Kathryn Hume, “The Thematic Design of *Grettis Saga*,” *JEGP* 77 (1974): 469–86.

13. CSI 2:330; ÍF 6:122, ch. 1.

actions is ‘ráða’ (judge/counsel/advise).”<sup>14</sup> In my argument I would add to that the term “ríki,” used by the poor farmers to denote Þorbjörg’s advantage by virtue of her power to control the situation and its denouement. Throughout the saga there are incidents in which reference is explicitly made to characters’ possession and assertion of their power to exercise their will to judge, to decide issues, to control others, frequently with the term *ráð* or *ráða*, and sometimes with a form of *ríki* in the text, or with situational description in which such power is implied or contested. The point of this episode, in any case, is clearly marked by the composer himself: “It can be seen from this incident that Thorbjörg was a woman of firm character” (*Í þessum atburði má hér sýnask, hversu mikill skörungr hon var*).

## 3

Indeed, readers even partially familiar with the traditional Icelandic paroemial inventory cannot get very far in *Fóstbræðra saga* without the proverb “Jafnan segir inn ríkri ráð” intruding upon their consciousness. First attested for Old Norse in line 89 of *Málsháttakvæði*,<sup>15</sup> a poem attributed to Bishop Bjarni Kolbeinsson, composed ca. 1200, this proverb’s force is often implicitly celebrated in the *Íslendingasögur*. The saga figures’ chronic obsession with asserting and maintaining the right to decide, to have control over their social environment, was carefully examined by Robert Cook in his 1971 paper, “The Sagas of Icelanders as Dramas of the Will.”<sup>16</sup> “Borrowing the medieval division of the soul into three faculties—reason, emotions, will—we can say that the saga treatment of character centers almost exclusively on the will, to the neglect of the other two faculties.”<sup>17</sup> Recounting examples from a selection of several types of scenes in the sagas—whetting, requests for aid, trickery, persuasion of reluctant persons, warnings, obstinacy, and wise refusals—Cook elucidates ways in which “saga

14. Gos, “Women as a Source,” 285.

15. Finnur Jónsson, ed., *Den norsk-isländske skjaldedigtning*, vols. B1–2, Rettet tekst (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1912–15), B2:138–45.

16. In *Proceedings of the First International Saga Conference, University of Edinburgh, 1971*, ed. Peter Foote et al. (London: The Viking Society for Northern Research, 1973), 88–113.

17. *Ibid.*, 91.

characters express themselves, and relate to each other primarily on the level of will.”<sup>18</sup> With the development of feud theory, especially in the decades following Cook’s paper, we might now see his observations, apt in themselves, as having reference to the competitive behavior of individuals in a society where resolution of conflict is sought in the processes of feud.

A pervasive social urge to assert control over territory would understandably be expressed in personal terms as one’s insistence upon having one’s way, in small matters as well as in larger ones. “Jafnan segir inn ríkri ráð” would then express communal wisdom regarding the anticipated outcome of any feud conflict. In any case, as Þorbjörg in chapter 1 of *Fóstbræðra saga* makes clear to her farmers that it is not her will that they execute Grettir, and as they in turn make clear to her that, right or, as they believe, wrong, she has the power to impose her will upon them, the practical force of this unspoken proverb is abundantly evident in this integral preludic episode. That force is then echoed repeatedly by successive events and relationships treated by the composer throughout the saga, even though the proverb itself is never explicitly iterated in the narrative.

#### 4

The idea that the stories of the *Íslendingasögur* are given thematic clarification by their composers’ use of proverbs is nothing new. As Guðbrandur Vigfússon, in his commentary on *Hrafnkels saga*, observes of them, “These saws are to a Saga what the gnostic element is to a Greek play.”<sup>19</sup> F. York Powell, in introducing his translation of *Færeyinga saga*, echoes these thoughts: “These idioms and saws, and such laconisms . . . are the very life-blood of a true Saga; where they abound, they are the infallible tests of a good tradition, ripened on the lips of good narrators; where they are absent, the story is the work of the scribe writing from his own head without the genuine impulses of the story-teller before his audience.”<sup>20</sup> While, as today’s readers will be

18. Ibid., 94.

19. Guðbrand Vigfússon and F. York Powell, eds., *Origines Islandicae*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), 1:492.

20. Frederick York Powell, trans., *Færeyinga saga, or The Tale of Thronð of Gate*, Northern Library 2 (London: David Nutt, 1896), xxxix.



particularly aware, Powell's faith in the "true" results of what developed as the Free Prose understanding of oral saga traditions seems now without useful foundation, and while recently it has become more obvious that the composers themselves used proverbial material quite consciously and explicitly for their literary purposes, Powell's understanding of the importance of such texts to the narratives he studied is well justified by our own observations.

The process of proverbial allusion would be best understood in the context of a discussion of the definition of those texts we term "proverbs." In some respects, this discussion began rather early in Western society, with the coining of the words *paroemia* in Greek and *proverbium* in Latin. The former has roots that might be interpreted as "words by the road" and the latter's signified as "words put forth." B. J. Whiting summarized Aristotle's views of the proverb as "a short saying of philosophic nature, of great antiquity, the product of the masses rather than the classes, constantly applicable, and appealing because it bears a semblance to universal truth."<sup>21</sup> However, discussion subsequent to that of the Greek philosophers brought with it less certainty as to what constitutes those texts we call proverbs. In more recent times Archer Taylor complained, "The definition of a proverb is too difficult to repay the undertaking; and should we fortunately combine in a single definition all the essential elements and give each the proper emphasis, we should not even then have a touchstone."<sup>22</sup> In this absence of theoretical clarity, he concludes with a working definition: "Let us be content with recognizing that a proverb is a saying current among the folk."<sup>23</sup>

And yet, addressing that impossibility of strict definition, he says, most significantly, "An incommunicable quality tells us this sentence is proverbial and that one is not."<sup>24</sup> Many definers of the proverb since Taylor, and most before him, insist upon the attested currency of a text for it to be considered paroemial. Such a qualification, however, is one external to any universal structural understanding of what all

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21. Bartlett Jere Whiting, "The Nature of the Proverb," in *When Evensong and Morrowson Accord: Three Essays on the Proverb*, ed. Joseph Harris (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 56.

22. Archer Taylor, *The Proverb* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931), 3.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

such sayings must have in common, that is, the feature or features that project the “incommunicable” quality of which Taylor speaks. The actual existence of such a puzzling quality is clarified most usefully by Shirley Arora, who identifies a set of linguistic markers, the greater density of which in a text increases its chances of being perceived as proverbial in nature.<sup>25</sup> Her work indicates that we have the grammatical competence to generate and recognize such markers, whose structural and perhaps lexical features will signal that the content itself bears a burden of communal wisdom. In fact, as Arora’s survey demonstrates, artificially manufactured proverbs, non-current texts containing the specified features, tend to be perceived as proverbs even when they are not so by virtue of use and currency. Thus, the definition of those texts we call proverbs need not require reference to currency, although we may naturally assume that they might be current, given their didactic value. Rather the “internal definition,” here by analogy to Ferdinand de Saussure and his distinction regarding linguistics as the “internal” approach to language, involves the study of linguistic features that can be observed to accompany such texts.<sup>26</sup>

With this theoretical context of the proverb’s definition established, we may proceed to consider proverbial allusion, how it functions, and its potential force in saga narrative. Such allusion is first discussed by Erasmus in the preface to his *Adages*, where he remarks that their use and appreciation in literature necessitate a comprehensive knowledge of proverbs in their base form in order to understand more fully what one is reading:

Even if there were no other use for proverbs, at the very least they are not only helpful but necessary for the understanding of the best authors, that is, the oldest. Most of these are textually corrupt, and in this respect they are particularly so, especially as proverbs have a touch of the enigmatic, so that they are not understood even by readers

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25. “The Perception of Proverbiality,” *Proverbium* 1 (1984): 1–38.

26. Comparing the study of linguistics to a game of chess, Saussure distinguishes between that which is external and that which is internal to our understanding of the game: “In each instance one can determine the nature of the phenomenon by applying this rule: everything that changes the system in any way is internal.” Ferdinand De Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), 23. Thus, the contextual use of the proverbial string is external to its nature, whereas the structure of the string is crucial to its generation and recognition.

of some learning; and then they are often inserted disconnectedly, sometimes in a mutilated state . . . . Occasionally they are alluded to in one word, as in Cicero in his Letters to Atticus: "Help me, I beg you; 'prevention,' you know," where he refers to the proverb "Prevention is better than cure."<sup>27</sup>

Clearly, competence in a culture's proverbial inventory is the best way to be prepared for an awareness, or understanding, of such allusions.

"Earlier scholars have overstated the fixity of proverbs," observes Wolfgang Mieder. "In actual use, especially in the case of intentional speech play, proverbs are quite often manipulated."<sup>28</sup> He refers us to Norrick's comments in *How Proverbs Mean*, where—speaking of the didactic quality of proverbs—the latter notes that "mention of one crucial recognizable phrase serves to call forth the entire proverb. Let us designate this minimal recognizable unit as the kernel of the proverb . . . . Proverbs bear much greater social, philosophical and psychological significance for speakers than do other idiomatic units."<sup>29</sup> The semantic density of proverbial material thus impresses such texts upon our consciousness. "Consequently a speaker can call forth a particular proverb for his hearer with a brief allusion to its kernel" (Norrick, 45). The kernel of the proverb in *Fóstbræðra* operative in defining the saga's thematic coherence would then be composed primarily of (*segja*) *ráð(a)* with secondary qualification in the term *rík(ri)*.<sup>30</sup>

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The second chapter of the saga develops this theme as it introduces the two heroes and then a local chieftain, Þorgils Arason, as "powerful,

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27. *Collected Works of Erasmus*, trans. M. M. Phillips and R. A. B. Mynors, vol. 31, *Adages Iii to Iv100* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 18.

28. Wolfgang Mieder, *Proverbs: A Handbook* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004), 7.

29. Neal Norrick, *How Proverbs Mean: Semantic Studies in English Proverbs* (Berlin: Mouton, 1985), 45.

30. See Bjarni Vilhjálmsson and Óskar Halldórsson, *Íslenzkir málshættir*, 2nd ed. (Reykjavík: Almenna bókafélagið, 1982), 268, s.v. "ríkur," for variant forms of the proverb.



honest, wise and well-liked” (*vitr ok vinsæll, ríkr ok ráðvandr*).<sup>31</sup> The latter term, “ráðvandr,” is defined by Guðbrandur Vigfússon as “‘heeding one’s ráð,’ honest, upright.”<sup>32</sup> In opposition to this mature wisdom, the composer goes on to describe the non-productive dynamic in the relationship between Þorgils’ cousin, Þorgeirr, and Þormóðr, who are said to be “alike in temperament” (*í mörgu skapglíkir*). “Both also felt early on—and it later turned out to be true—that they would die fighting, since neither was the kind of man to back off from or give in to anyone he came up against” (*Snimmendis sagði þeim svá hugr um, sem síðar bar raun á, at þeir myndi vápnbitnir verða, því at þeir váru ráðnir til at láta sinn blut hvergi eða undir leggja, við hverja menn sem þeir ætti málum at skipta*). On these grounds, the two undertake the, here emphatically pagan, ritual of declaring brotherhood: “They thus swore that whoever survived the other would avenge his death” (*Því tóku þeir þat ráð með fastmælum, at sá þeira skyldi hefna annars, er lengr lifði*).<sup>33</sup> The narrator clearly disapproves of this ráð from a Christian perspective: “Though people called themselves Christians in those days, Christianity was a new and very undeveloped religion and many of the sparks of heathendom still flickered, manifesting themselves as undesirable customs” (*En þó at þá væri menn kristnir kallaðir, þá var þó í þann tíð ung kristni ok mjök vangor, svá at margir gneistar heiðninnar váru þó þá eptir ok í óvenju lagðir*).<sup>34</sup>

Their subsequent unpopular behavior in the neighborhood upon their formalization of this agreement leads to complaints, and Vermundr, the powerful authority whose position was already conveyed to the saga audience in chapter 1 with the decisive actions of his wife, is called upon to intervene. Exercising his power by banishing Þorgeirr’s family from Ísafjörðr, where they had settled without legal permission, he voices his anticipation of a quieter district: “and it is our hope that Thormod will be less unruly if he parts company with Þorgeir” (*væntum vér ok, at minni stormr standi af Þormóði, ef þeir Þorgeirr skiljask*).<sup>35</sup> Hávarr’s acquiescence is expressed in terms

31. CSI 2:331; ÍF 6:124, ch. 2.

32. Richard Cleasby and Guðbrand Vigfússon, *An Icelandic–English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), henceforth CV, 487b.

33. CSI 2:331; ÍF 6:125, ch. 2.

34. CSI 2:331; ÍF 6:124, ch. 2.

35. CSI 2:332; ÍF 6:126, ch. 2.

recalling the proverb whose kernel is under discussion as he remarks, with some truculence, “Vermund, *you have the power to make me leave* Ísafjörð with all my belongings, but I expect *Thorgeir will want to decide* for himself where he stays” (*Ráða muntu því, Vermundr, at vér munum ráðask í brott ór Ísafirði með fé vart, en eigi veit ek, nema Þorgeirr vili ráða vistum sínum*). Vermundr thus has the power to force Hávarr’s household from Ísafjörðr, but the wayfarings of Þorgeirr are another matter, for him to *ráða* as he wills, and thus beyond anyone’s control, with the predictable result that “despite his youth, he was an unwelcome guest at most places he visited” (*ok var hann mǫrgum mǫnnum nokkurr andvaragestr, þar sem hann kom, þó at hann væri á ungum aldri*).

In the next episode the chieftain Jǫðurr of Skeljabrekka is the initiator in a horse-borrowing conflict with Þorgeirr’s father. “*He had authority in the district*, but was ambitious and slew many man men while rarely paying compensation for the lives he took” (*ríkr í heraðinu ok stórráðr, vígamaðr mikill ok bætti menn sjaldan fé, þótt hann vægi*). Hávarr allows him to take along one of his horses on a trip for flour but qualifies this permission, “*But I’d like you to return the horse to me on your way back and take it no farther*” (*ok vil ek, at þú látir hestinn hér eptir, er þú ferr aptr, ok hafir þú eigi lengra*). Upon the return journey, however, Jǫðurr decides to renege, despite the warning of his companions: “*You can do that if you wish, but Havar has never looked kindly on broken agreements*” (*Gera máttu þat, ef þú vill, en eigi hefir Hávari jafnan líkat, ef af því væri brugðit, er hann vildi vera láta*).<sup>36</sup> As they anticipated, Hávarr objects, “*I don’t want the horse to go any farther*” (*Eigi vil ek, at nú fari hestrinn lengra*) and Jǫðurr asserts his own will, answering, “*We shall have the horse with or without your consent*” (*Þó munu vér hafa hestinn, þótt þú vilir eigi ljá*). “*That remains to be seen*” (*Svá mun vera, at þat sé*), comments Hávarr, who, proceeding to attack Jǫðurr, is then killed by him. When news of his father’s slaying reaches Þorgeirr, he seeks redress at Skeljabrekka, where Jǫðurr advises him that he is not accustomed to pay compensation for his slayings. “*I did not know that,*” says Thorgeir, “*but whatever the case, it is my duty to seek compensation from you now since I stand closest to the man you have slain*” (“*Ókunnigt er mér þat,*”

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36. CSI 2:332; ÍF 6:127, ch. 2.

*segir Þorgeirr; “en hvat sem um þat er, þá komr þetta til mín, at leita eptir þessum vígsbótum, því at mér er nær hoggvit”).*<sup>37</sup> When Jǫðurr refuses to alter his discouraging custom, Þorgeirr delivers his ultimatum, “*It’s for you to decide how much you pay, and it’s for me to decide whether I accept it or not*” (*Þér munuð ráða, hvern sóma þér vilið gera, en vér munum ráða þykkju várri*).<sup>38</sup> Having killed Jǫðurr in vengeance, Þorgeirr reports back to his mother, Þórelfr, who tells him to stay the night before seeking protection with Þorgils, since “*Tomorrow, men will come here looking for you and we don’t have the strength to protect you against a large party*” (*Hér munu menn koma á morgin at leita þín, ok hofum vér eigi ríki til at halda þik fyrir fjölmenni*).<sup>39</sup>

The lines quoted from dialogue in these two scenes contain lexical evidence, which I have italicized, here as elsewhere in this essay, of the main weight of their import—the conflicts over horse and compensation are delivered in terms of “*vilja*,” “*ráða*,” and “*ríki*,” in accordance with what we might expect from the rhetoric of feud and its literary expression in Cook’s dramas of the will. In commenting on the skilled bravery of Þorgeirr, a lad of fifteen, taking vengeance on a great chieftain for his father’s death, the composer employs one of those controversial *Fóstbræðra* passages mentioned above, slipping as they do into ecclesiastical rhetoric:

And yet it was no great wonder since the Almighty Creator had forged in Thorgeir’s breast such a strong and sturdy heart that he was as fearless and brave as a lion in whatever trials or tribulations befell him. And as all good things come from God, so too does steadfastness, and it is given unto all bold men together with a free will that they may themselves choose whether they do good or evil. Thus Jesus Christ has made Christians his sons and not his slaves, so that he might reward all according to their deeds.” (CSI 2:336)

En þó var eigi undarligt, því at inn hæsti höfuðsmiðr hafði skapat ok gefit í brjóst Þorgeiri svá øruggt hjarta ok hart, at hann hræddisk ekki, ok hann var svá øruggr í öllum mannraunum sem it óarga dýr. Ok af

37. CSI 2:334; ÍF 6:129–30, ch. 3.

38. CSI 2:334; ÍF 6:130, ch. 3.

39. CSI 2:335; ÍF 6:132, ch. 3.



því at allir góðir hlutir eru af guði górvir, þá er øruggleikr af guði górr ok gefinn í brjóst hvötum drengjum ok þar með sjálfræði at hafa til þess, er þeir vilja, góðs eða ills, því at Krístr hefir kristna menn sonu sína górt, en eigi þræla, en þat mun hann hverjum gjalda, sem til vinnr. (ÍF 6:130, ch. 3)

The composer thus comes forth from his story to comment upon it as he has brought it to this point, directing the attention of his audience to the long-ensuing narrative of the lives of the two *fóstbræðr*, explaining events so as to make clear the purpose of his whole story: people make choices, exercising that *will* God gave them, and in doing so they are thus self-defined and will themselves ultimately be judged on the basis of those choices. Here, invoking the Christian doctrine of Free Will, the composer calls God the “höfuðsmiðr,” “a chief workman, the architect” (CV 308b), the most powerful being, who exercises his power to give all people free will, so they in turn may choose good or evil for themselves and be rewarded accordingly.

Preben Meulengracht Sørensen considers at length the saga composer’s intentions at this moral level, noticing in particular that the oddly learned, ecclesiastically flavored passages are ironically humorous. Referring to Halldór Laxness’ 1952 satirization of this saga, he observes, “It can be said that since the appearance of *Gerpla* it has been difficult not to see parody in *Fóstbræðra*.”<sup>40</sup> Yet that parodic style had been in the narrative long before *Gerpla* and the critics who have made much of it, in fact probably in the first layers of the saga’s written narrative, to judge by its occasional appearance throughout. Humor at a cultural distance is especially difficult to recognize, let alone interpret, but the tenor of this aspect of *Fóstbræðra* reminds one of passages in *Grettis saga* where its hero speaks lines that might have been noble in his ancestral society of past generations and yet are easily and humorously deflatable by his own time. For example, the visit to Auðunn Ásgeirsson—a matching of heroes’ strength motivated by a past humiliation, with Grettir’s challenge, “I want to fight you” (*Ek vil berjask við þik*)—results in what must seem to readers now the

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40. Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, “On Humour, Heroes, Morality, and Anatomy in *Fóstbræðra saga*,” in *Twenty-Eight Papers Presented to Hans Bekker-Nielsen on the Occasion of his Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. Michael Barnes et al. (Odense: Odense University Press, 1993), 396.

humorous laconism, “I have to see to the food first” (*Sjá mun ek fyrst ráð fyrir mat mínum*).<sup>41</sup> Putting the misfit hero in his place, Auðunn affirms what matters in his world, the storing of food, responding not only to his old friend’s unrealistic ambitions, but also more generally, for his audience, to the lack of viability of a heroic stance where there are only farmers—and merchants, as the composer makes clear elsewhere—trying to make a living.

As the humor of *Grettis saga* often punctures Grettir’s attempts to impose the heroic mode on Christian Iceland, so too it might be seen as taking Twain-like jabs at the very notion of nobility in such behavior. Humor becomes a weapon in the hand of the composer, enabling him to challenge, by belittling, the values according to which some pre-Christians may have lived, and that certainly had once been admired and praised in the country’s literature. The violence of the *fóstbræðr* is as out of place in their society as Grettir’s gratuitous aggressiveness is in his saga, and this conflict between peaceable communities and dangerous ruffians ostracized for their ways seems to be a thematic thread common to both works. The humor itself, in both cases, is derived from an abrupt contrasting of the behavior of two groups.

Similarly, Þorgeirr’s courage is explained in high parodic style, using medical texts from the continent. The ludicrous explanation of his behavior occasions the ironically implied criticism we expect of this mode. Powerful and courageous because of God’s gifts, he becomes ever more amoral in his unrestrained, violent actions, especially after his estrangement from his *fóstbróðir*, whereas Þormóðr’s behavior is ameliorated with time and the influence of King Óláfr. The king’s twice-voiced determination that Þorgeirr is not in every respect a lucky man can be interpreted at a spiritual level when he seems not altogether dead after he is killed. “Þorgeirr serves demonic powers after his death, and that is the saga-author’s final judgement on his conduct in this life.”<sup>42</sup> Thus, as Meulengracht Sørensen notices, traditional Germanic heroism is reinterpreted and re-evaluated in Christian terms at the same time as the violence of pre-Christian times is ridiculed. The inevitability of the old pagan wisdom of feud—that the more

41. CSI 2:94; ÍF 7:96, ch. 28.

42. Meulengracht Sørensen, “On Humour, Heroes, Morality,” 411.

powerful decides—remains true enough in the secular, physical world, but the Christian assumption of faith in God and his spiritual kingdom presents another plane on which such decisions take place; the final decision, that of the “*höfuðsmiðr*,” has immensely greater impact than the secular *ráð* with which the old communal wisdom was solely concerned.<sup>43</sup> It seems clear that, although this saga has no introductory segment precisely identifiable as a Norwegian prelude, which we might anticipate in the *Íslendingasögur*, that portion of its narrative culminating in the stylistically remarkable and critically much-noticed passage on Free Will is preludic in a thematic sense, as I have suggested above.

## 6

This test of good or evil impulses in the exercise of power is studied through much of the rest of *Fóstbræðra*—with the dark and subversive humor already identified intruding in passages where power is tried or challenged. Thus, in the home of the “rather faint-hearted” (*huglauss í hjarta*)<sup>44</sup> Þorkell at Gørvidalr, Þorgeirr finds himself in the company, at close quarters, of Vermundr’s kinsman Butraldi, “a loner of no fixed abode”: “He was a large, powerfully-built man with an ugly face, quick tempered and vengeful, and he was a great slayer of men” (*einbleypingr, mikill maðr vexti, rammr at afli, ljótr í ásjónu, harðfengr í skaplyndi, vígamaðr mikill, nasbráðr ok heiptúðigr*).<sup>45</sup> The association between two such figures in the fearful presence of their timid host already invites humorous observation. Butraldi crosses himself before the meal, at which “Neither of them

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43. This elevation of secular, pagan ethical assumptions to the Christian spiritual level is no novelty in medieval Germanic literature. In Old English, for instance, in *The Wanderer* we see how the pre-Christian concept of *ār*, the protection granted a guest by the old code of hospitality, is translated at the beginning and more especially at the end of that poem into God’s protective mercy, or Grace, when the speaker in the poem seeks the heavenly *fæstnes* (firmness, stability, stronghold). Similarly readers of the Old English *Seafarer* will remark how the old pagan aspiration for the praise of men is elevated to hope of accolades from the heavenly chorus itself: “ond his lof sibþan lifge mid englum / awa to ealdre, ecan lifes blæd, / dream mid dugeþum” (lines 78b-80a). For some studies on this subject, see Richard North, *Pagan Words and Christian Meanings*, Costerus New Series 81 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1991).

44. CSI 2:340; ÍF 6:142, ch. 6.

45. CSI 2:340; ÍF 6:143, ch. 6.



would share either the knife or the food with the other” (*Hvárrgi þeira vildi deila við annan kníf né kjötstykki*).<sup>46</sup> The tension of the scene, relying on the men’s exaggerated preoccupation with their aggressive masculinity as opposed to Þorkell’s fear of their violently disrupting his household, prepares the atmosphere for the ensuing robustly heroic battle. In a scene evocative of Skarpheðinn’s acrobatic performance at Markarfljót, Þorgeirr slid down a snowy slope, axe raised, descending upon Butraldi, who “looked up, but before he knew what was happening Þorgeir struck him full on the chest with his axe and cut right through him and he fell back down the slope” (*lítr upp ok finnr eigi fyrr en Þorgeirr hjó framan í fang honum ok þar á hol; fellr hann á bak aptr*).<sup>47</sup> At the conclusion of this scene, in which Þorgeirr’s superior power is conclusively demonstrated and then celebrated with a verse, the audience learns that no vengeance would be taken for Butraldi by his relatives, their reticence humorously explained: “they had no desire to be sent off to rest for the night by his [Þorgeirr’s] weapons” (*því at þeim þótti illt at eiga náttból undir vápnum Þorgeirs*).<sup>48</sup>

In the last episode of killing before the *fóstbræðr* part from each other, their conflict is with a respected member of the community, in circumstances where the righteousness of their involvement is especially questionable. Þorgils Másson, a relative of Grettir’s father, Ásmundr Þorgrímsson, and a “big, strong man, skilful in the use of weapons and a good farmer” (*mikill maðr ok sterkr, vápnfmr, góðr býðegn*),<sup>49</sup> carving up a stranded whale, refuses to share with them the portion he has cut, and Þorgeirr observes that what he has already taken is considerable. Þorgils is not inclined to give in, and Þorgeirr responds with typical aggression, “Then you will have to see how long you can hold us away from it” (*Þat munu þér þá reyna verða, hversu lengi þér haldið á hvalnum fyrir oss*).<sup>50</sup> The fight between the two ends tragically for Þorgils, because “Þorgeirr was the deadlier of the two” (*Þorgeirr var þeira meir lagðr til mannskaða*),<sup>51</sup> a

46. CSI 2:341; ÍF 6:145, ch. 6. See TPMA 8:210.

47. CSI 2:342; ÍF 6:146, ch. 6.

48. CSI 2:343; ÍF 6:147, ch. 6.

49. CSI 2:343; ÍF 6:148, ch. 7.

50. CSI 2:343; ÍF 6:148–49, ch. 7.

51. CSI 2:343; ÍF 6:149, ch. 7.

blunt judgement in no way consonant with the heroic pattern, but rather humorously laconic in its conclusion on the skills of an experienced killer.

## 7

Outlawed for this slaying, Þorgeirr ranges with Þormóðr over Strandir—“and they prevailed over all things like weeds overtaking a field” (*ok gengu þeir einir yfir allt sem lok yfir akra*).<sup>52</sup> The composer uses the term *ofsi*, “overbearing, tyranny” (CV 464b), of their dominance in the region in the following scene, where he separates the *fóstbræðr* both personally and morally through the subsequent narrative: “People say that at the height of their tyranny, Thorgeir spoke these words to Thormod: ‘Do you know of any other two men as eager as we or as brave, or indeed anyone who has stood the test of his valour so often?’” (*Svá segir sumir menn, at Þorgeirr mælti við Þormóð, þá er þeir vǫru í ofsa sínum sem mestum: “Hvar veiztu nú aðra tvá menn okkr jafna í hvatleika ok karlmennsku, þá er jafnmjök sé reyndir í mjögum mannraunum, sem vit erum?”*).<sup>53</sup> Þormóðr responds thoughtfully, and drawing significantly upon the proverbial wisdom of his culture, “Such men could be found if they were looked for who are no lesser men than us” (*Finnask munu þeir menn, ef at er leitat, er eigi eru minni kappar en vit erum*).<sup>54</sup> At this Þorgeirr issues the hypothetical challenge that is to end the path of their life together: “Which of us do you think would win if we confronted each other?” (*Hvat ætlar þú, hvárr okkarr myndi*

52. CSI 2:344; ÍF 6:149–50, ch. 7.

53. CSI 2:344; ÍF 6:150, ch. 7.

54. CSI 2:344; ÍF 6:148–9, ch. 7. This conversation has its context in the proverbial wisdom deriving from the rhetoric of *mannjafnaðr*. The reasonableness of Þormóðr’s response would have gained emphasis from the audience’s awareness of a set of proverbial texts found in other sagas, presumably derived from *Hávamál* 64: “Ríki sitt / scyli ráðsnotra hverr / í hófi hafa; / þá hann þat finnr, / er með fræcnom kœmr, / at engi er einna hvatastr.” See TPMA 12:326. For attestations in prose, see *Hrólfs saga kraka* and *Volsunga saga*, in *Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, 4 vols. (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1954), 1:153 and 1:71, respectively; *Morkinskinna*, ed. Ármann Jakobsson and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson, 2 vols., *Íslenzk fornrit* 23–24 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2011), 2:148; and the entirety of the first chapter of *Mágus saga*, in *Fornsögur Suðurlanda*, ed. Gustaf Cederschiöld (Lund: Berling, 1884), 1–2.

*af qðrum bera, ef vit reyndim með okkr?*).<sup>55</sup> Þormóðr answers, “I don’t know, but I do know that *this question of yours will divide us and end our companionship*. We cannot stay together” (*Þat veit ek eigi, en hitt veit ek, at sjá spurning þín mun skilja okkra samvistu ok fgruneyti, svá at vit munum eigi lqngum ásamt vera*). Þorgeirr, realizing for once that he has gone too far, tries to retract, “I wasn’t really speaking my mind—saying that I wanted us to fight each other” (*Ekki var mér þetta alhugat, at ek vilda, at vit reyndim með okkr harðfengi*). But the idea has been voiced: “It came into your mind as you spoke it and we shall go our separate ways” (*Í hug kom þér, meðan þú mæltir, ok munu vit skilja félagit*), counters Þormóðr. Here Þorgeirr’s aggressive exuberance finally isolates him even from his *fóstbróðir*. The challenge, whimsical as he claims or more seriously motivated, differentiates him from Þormóðr in worldview, as he takes his closest associate as a possible competitor. The amorality of his expression initiates his permanent divergence from the fate of his old friend—they are now on different spiritual paths, exercising their power in opposing ways. In the immediately subsequent chapters we see the results of Þorgeirr’s choice, and after that, Þormóðr’s exaggeratedly energetic vengeance for his fallen associate, justified in the assignment of the task by King Óláfr himself.

## 8

As Þorgeirr goes his way, making himself an *andvaragestr*, “an unwelcome guest” (CV 21a), among the communities of Strandir, his cousins, Þorgils Arason and Illugi, have purchased a share in a ship for him to journey into his outlawry. Several stories of the time intervening, before his departure for Norway, accrue to the written text here. One of particular interest, about a horse conflict, is clearly intended to parallel the horse-borrowing incident that led to the death of his father, yet at the same time readers today are reminded also of the initial tragedy of *Hrafnkels saga* and its hero’s foolishly arrogant killing of the young Einarr Þorbjarnarson. In this latter work, the folly of the owner’s possessive treatment of a horse begins what can be seen as a narrative in which foolish behavior is a subject of primary

55. CSI 2:344; ÍF 6:151, ch. 7.



concern.<sup>56</sup> In addition, since the actual stealing of a horse was not an issue in either of these episodes of *Fóstbræðra*, one might question the gravity of both situations in which the killings occur. In that case, humorous distortion of concepts of honor and exaggeration of violence both become matters for consideration. In this scene Þorgeirr discovers that Bjarni Skúfsson has taken his horse in order to catch some sheep and demands that Bjarni dismount: “I think *it would be a good idea for you to get down off that horse* and give it back to its owner” (*Þat sýnisk mér nú ráð, at þú stígir af baki ok látir hestinn koma í hendr eiganda*).<sup>57</sup> Upon Bjarni’s refusal he persists, “*I want you to get down from the horse immediately*” (*Þat vil ek, at þú stígir nú þegar af baki*). And when Bjarni replies that the horse won’t be hurt by his riding it, Þorgeirr delivers his ultimatum, “*I must insist that you ride no farther at this present time*” (*Ek vil þessu ráða, at þú ríðir eigi lengra at sinni*). He then imposes his power to decide the matter with a spear through Bjarni’s middle, ending the confrontation and regaining his horse, after which he kills the servant Skúfr, for whom Bjarni had been collecting the sheep in the first place.

Two minor episodes in *Flateyjarbók*—whose theologically trained writer seems intent upon emphasizing the unbalanced, perhaps demonic, lack of restraint in Þorgeirr’s determination to exercise his power—precede his departure from Iceland. In both cases his behavior is obviously indefensible and seals beyond doubt the judgment of Icelandic society as well as of the ecclesiastical institution from whose culture these stories seem to emerge on the page. In the former he kills Torfi þoggull for not responding to his greetings, never realizing his victim could not hear him: “Thorgeir grew tired of calling out and his already bad mood turned to anger. He rode across the stream at Torfi and plunged his spear through him, killing him instantly” (*En er Þorgeiri leiddisk á hann at kalla, reiddisk hann við, er honum var áðr skappungt. Hann ríðr þá yfir ána at Torfa ok leggr spjóti í gegnum hann. Torfi var þegar dauðr*).<sup>58</sup> This recklessly lethal mood is matched in a second passage, where riding down to the ship he kills

56. For a full development of this argument see my “The Proverbial Heart of *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*: ‘Mér þykkir þar heimskum manni at duga, sem þú ert,’” *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies* 16 (2006): 28–54 ([http://scancan.net/article.pdf?id=harris\\_116](http://scancan.net/article.pdf?id=harris_116)).

57. CSI 2:346; ÍF 6:155, ch. 8.

58. CSI 2:345; ÍF 6:153, ch. 8.

a resting shepherd: “Thus he was rather hunched over, with his tired legs bent and his neck sticking out. When Thorgeir saw this he drew his axe in the air and let it fall on the man’s neck. The axe bit well and the head went flying off and landed some distance away” (*var hann nökkut bjúgr, steylðr á hæli ok lengði hálsinn. En er Þorgeirr sá þat, reiddi hann upp oxina ok lét detta á hálsinn. Oxin beit vel, ok fauk af höfuðit ok kom víðs fjarri niðr*).<sup>59</sup> “He had committed no wrong against me. If you want the truth I couldn’t resist the temptation—he stood so well poised for the blow” (*Eigi hafði hann nökkurar sakar til móts við mik, en hitt var satt, at ek máttu eigi við bindask, er hann stóð svá vel til hoggins*). he explains with his usual blunt brutality. “One can see from this . . . that your hands will never be idle” (*Þat mun sýnask í því . . . at þú munt óhandlatr reynask*), observes his cousin as the outlaw leaves his country.

As a member of King Óláfr’s court, Þorgeirr experiences some success. The king assigns him the task of seeking vengeance upon Þórir of Hrófá for having mistreated one of the his men: “I am asking you because I believe you will do my will in this matter” (*Því býð ek þér um þetta mál, at ek hygg, at þú munir minn vilja gera í þessu verki*).<sup>60</sup> He responds, “I am obliged to do as you bid me” (*Skylðr em ek til þess at gera þat, sem þú vill*). The composer thus makes clear that the venture is undertaken at the king’s will, rather than at Þorgeirr’s. At the scene of the king’s assigned vengeance there is undeniable humor in Þórir’s arrogant response to Þorgeirr’s demand for compensation: “It may well be that you are here as the king’s representative, but I seriously doubt that these are the king’s words you speak” (*Vera má, at svá sé, at þú hafir hans umboð, en varla virðisk mér svá, sem ek heyra orð konungsins, þó at þú mælir*).<sup>61</sup> And Þorgeirr’s responding threat in advance of the anticipated spear thrust matches his victim’s belligerent tone as he rejects a peaceable resolution: “It is true that you do not hear him speak personally, but *it may well be that you feel his power*” (*Satt er þat, at þú heyrir eigi hann sjálfan mæla, en þó má vera, at þú reynir nökkurt sinn hans ríki*). The violence of course is Þorgeirr’s, as usual, but the *will* to violence comes at the king’s bidding,

59. CSI 2:347; ÍF 6:157, ch. 8.

60. CSI 2:358; ÍF 6:183, ch. 13.

61. CSI 2:359; ÍF 6:185, ch. 13.

and the deed is one for which the king thanks Þorgeirr at their next meeting (CSI 2:362; ÍF 6:192, ch. 14).

It seems likely that the composer next purposely juxtaposes a strikingly different scene with this one, a scene that also reminds us emphatically of the first episode of *Fóstbræðra*. In it Þorgeirr gives free reign to his own will to save the life of the smith Veglágr, who has turned out to be a thief and a forger of keys. When Þorgils Arason demands he be hanged, Þorgeirr, like Þorbjörg digra with a conceivably more just cause before him, exclaims, “Despite what you think is the right course of action, in this instance the man’s price will be too costly for you. *He will not be executed if I have any say in the matter*” (*Hvat sem yðr sýnisk rétt vera um þetta mál, þá mun yðr þó verða maðrinn dýrkeyptr í þessu sinni, ok eigi mun hann af lífi tekinn, ef ek má því ráða*).<sup>62</sup> The composer has Þorgeirr use precisely the same words, here italicized, as those of Þorbjörg, inviting comparison and contrast. But whereas the farmers of Ísafjörðr are the ones to voice the qualification “*Right or wrong, you have the power to prevent him from being executed*” (*Hafa muntu ríki til þess, at hann sé eigi af lífi tekinn, hvárt sem þat er rétt eða rangt*),<sup>63</sup> here it is the acknowledged perpetrator of injustice himself who declares his lack of concern over, “what you think is the right course of action” (*Hvat sem yðr sýnisk rétt vera*).<sup>64</sup> Þorbjörg’s evidence of being a *mikill skörungr*, a “great leader” (CV 565b), when she provides help for an aristocratic kinsman in temporarily humiliating difficulties, can have only contrastive associations with this episode, where Þorgeirr saves by threat of force the life of a proven thief. He has clearly used his power in the interests of injustice, forcing the audience to recall once again the admonitory explanation of his behavior and character after he has taken vengeance for the killing of his father.

Upon Þorgeirr’s return to the Norwegian court, King Óláfr thanks him for carrying out his will in Iceland, but when Þorgeirr reasserts his desire to return to Iceland another time, the king reminds him of his earlier observation on his character, perhaps even referring to his spiritual flaw, “What I said to you the first time we met will now

62. CSI 2:360; ÍF 6:188, ch. 13.

63. CSI 2:330; ÍF 6:122, ch. 1.

64. CSI 2:360; ÍF 6:188, ch. 1.



come to pass—you will not be fortunate in all you do” (*Nú mun at því koma, sem ek sagða inn fyrsta tíma, er þú komt á vörn fund, at þú myndir eigi vera gæfumaðr í öllum hlutum*).<sup>65</sup> Allowing him nevertheless to depart for home, the king cautions him, “we will not meet again if we part company now” (*eigi munu vit sjásk síðan, ef vit skiljum nú*). Þorgeirr, always determined in whatever venture, insists, “I fully intend to return to meet you next summer” (*þat ætla ek, at fara á yðvarn fund at sumri*). At this the king observes, “You may well intend it, but it will not come to pass” (*Vera má, at svá sé, at þú ætlir þat, en eigi mun svá verða*). King Óláfr, who, as is the way with Norwegian kings in their sagas, sees farther than his subjects, understands that despite the bent of Þorgeirr’s own will, a Will beyond his by now has other designs for him and the character that he has made of himself. Just as later the king predicts that he and Þormóðr will be together after death, so here he predicts Þorgeirr’s death, but with a different spiritual outcome as a result.

Ultimately it is the earlier, seemingly unjustified killing of Þorgils Másson over the stranded whale that leads to Þorgeirr’s earthly demise. Gautr Sleituson, a relative of Þorgils, tries to provoke his killer into a lethal confrontation as they wait at the ship to leave again for Norway, but with the inevitable results: “he who does such deeds / often reaps a just reward” (*opt verðr rík, þeims rækir, / raun*), observes Þormóðr in a verse celebrating Gautr’s demise.<sup>66</sup> And then a relative of Gautr’s, Þórarinn ofsi Þorvaldsson, in company with the Greenlander Þorgrímr trolli Einarsson, discovers the familial burden of taking vengeance for Gautr despite having previously made a truce with Þorgeirr. By means of a ruse they weaken his forces, and then after a long, gruesome battle, Þorgeirr is killed and Þórarinn ofsi mutilates his corpse, beheading him. The composer insists again that his courage was God-given: “It was the Almighty who touched Thorgeir’s heart and put such fearlessness into his breast, and thus his courage was neither inborn nor of humankind but came from the Creator on high” (*Almáttigr er sá, sem svá snart hjarta ok óhrætt gaf í brjóst Þorgeiri; ok eigi var hans hugprýði af mönnum gort né honum*

65. CSI 2:362; ÍF 6:194, ch. 14.

66. CSI 2:365; ÍF 6:201, ch. 15, v. 13, lines 7–8. Guðni Jónsson glosses as follows: “sá kemst oft í harða raun, sem rækir slíkt” (ibid., note).

*í brjóst borin, heldr af inum hæsta hofuðsmið*).<sup>67</sup> It would seem all the more tragic, then, that he made the choices he did.

## 9

When Þormóðr presents himself at court, the king's first observation upon learning his identity is that he will pursue vengeance for the death of Þorgeirr. And it is with this purpose in mind that he seeks passage with Skúfr to Greenland, making his way to the home of the powerful chieftain, Þorkell Leifsson, at Brattahlíð in Eiríksfjörðr. He first sets himself at odds with his host in an episode pertaining to his unfortunate ways with and competition over women, which are not of concern in this essay. In doing so, however, he creates the atmosphere for adverse reaction among Greenland's most powerful people to his path of vengeance for Þorgeirr. In these latter passages of the saga, the composer casts Þormóðr in the roles of trickster and assumer of disguise. Humor is thus attached to most of these episodes, and although Þormóðr's pursuit of vengeance for his *fóstbróðir* and King Óláfr's *hirðmaðr* extends far beyond what was required, it does so with no noticeable signal of disapproval on the composer's part. Cloaked and hooded, he cleaves the head of Þorgrímr trolli at the Garðaping in Einarsfjörðr, where the latter, in a moment perhaps anticipatory of Gunnarr Lambason's death scene in *Njála*, has been telling a slanted story of his triumph over a sympathetic victim.

The competition for power is treated ironically when Þormóðr, by now having killed not only Þorgrímr trolli but also his nephews, Þórðr, Þorkell, and Falgeirr, has thus incurred the wrath of their mother, Þórdís. When she searches for Þormóðr where he has been healed of his wounds and harbored, at the home of the benign sorceress Gríma, she does so in the company of Þorkell Leifsson, under whose protection Gríma and her husband, Gamli, inhabit their isolated farm at the end of Eiríksfjörðr. The search scene, where stereotypically the powerful and increasingly frustrated searchers are foiled by those hiding the quarry, is here enhanced by Gríma's resort to sorcery. Apparently relying on the power of Þórr, whose image is carved into the chair where she hides Þormóðr, she objects to Þorkell about the

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67. CSI 2:368; ÍF 6:208, ch. 17.

search upon their arrival, “*I am astonished that Thordis thinks me capable of harbouring an outlaw from people as powerful as those at Longunes when there’s only the two of us here*” (*Undarligt sýnisk mér vera, at Þórdís ætlar, at ek muna halda skógarmann fyrir svá ríkum monnum sem þau eru á Longunesi, þar sem ek sit við annan mann í húsi*).<sup>68</sup> This covert insubordination escalates as she responds with powerful irony to Þórdís’ comment upon observing the Þórr image (“Grima still keeps to some of the old ways. She has a figure of Thor carved on the arms of her chair”<sup>69</sup>):

I seldom go to church to hear the lessons of the wise because it is so far away and there’s just the two of us here. What actually runs through my mind when I see the wooden figure of Thor is the thought that I can break it and burn it whenever I please. I also know that *the Creator of heaven and earth* and all things visible and invisible, who gives life to all things, *is far superior to Thor, and that no man may vanquish His power.* (CSI 2:385)

Ek kem sjaldan til kirkju at heyra kenningar lærðra manna, því at ek á langt at fara, en fámennt heima. Nú kœmr mér þá heldr í hug, er ek sé líkneski Þórs af tré gort, þat er ek má brjóta ok brenna, þegar ek vil, hversu miklu sá er meiri, er skapat hefir himin ok jörð ok alla hluti sýniliga ok ósýniliga ok öllum hlutum gefr líf ok engi maðr má yfir stíga. (ÍF 6:247, ch. 23)

When Þórdís asserts that without the protective presence of Þorkell she might come upon more of the truth, she is met only by Gríma’s smug complacency, the sorceress’s thoughts ironically couched at first in explicitly paroemial terms, and then moving toward spiritual advice leaving no doubt of the sorceress’ real views and intentions:

It’s just as the saying has it—“guessing often leads to error.” And there’s another saying, “if a man’s time has not come, something will save him.” What you sorely lack is a holy guardian so that the devil

68. CSI 2:385; ÍF 6:246, ch. 23.

69. CSI 2:384; Eptir er enn nokkut fyrnsku Grímu, er Þórs líkneski er skorit á stólsbrúðum hennar (ÍF 6:246, ch. 23).



lead you not into the evil you are contemplating. It's excusable when people guess and are mistaken, but there's no excusing the man who rejects the truth once it's proven.<sup>70</sup> (CSI 2:386)

Nú kómr at því, sem mælt er: Opt verður villr, er geta skal, ok hitt annars, at hverjum bergr nokkut, er eigi er feigr. En þér er nauðsyn, þat er heilög gæzla er svá yfir þér, at fjándinn á ekki þik svá heimila til illra hluta sem þú vildir gort hafa. Því at þat er várkunn, at menn geti stundum annars en er, en þat er engi várkunn, at hann trúi eigi því, er satt er, þá er hann reynir sannleikinn. (ÍF 6:247–8, ch. 23)

Not only does Gríma, in the composer's humorously ironic way, falsely contradict Þórdís' accurate assessment of the situation, but also she does so in terms that subvert the status quo of Christianity itself; her sorcery, derived from pagan powers, successfully defeats the power of her human superiors, as well as that of their God. Here as elsewhere in the sagas, the magic of powerless and marginalized folk compensates for their social vulnerability, as they attempt to defeat the plans of more powerful figures in their community. In this episode, however, where the local establishment is at odds with King Óláfr and his intentions, even pre-Christian forces are enlisted in the latter's interests, and in a way that leaves this humorously portrayed practitioner of pagan-motivated sorcery strangely innocent of evil. The socially subversive aspect of Gríma's power in this episode is converted to serve the interests of the Christian King Óláfr and his God.

The extension of royal power to Greenland is felt again as the king appears in a dream to Þorgrímr í Vík í Einarsfirði telling him to rescue Þormóðr. At this point he has become stranded on a skerry, wounded and exhausted from swimming to escape forces seeking to avenge his slaying of Ljótr, another of Þorgrímr trolli's nephews. To confirm his identity and the validity of the dream, the king reveals that one 'Gestr' staying with Þorgrímr í Vík is really the Iclander Helgu-Steinar, come also to seek vengeance for the killing of Þorgeirr. Upon his return to court, Þormóðr is eventually recognized for his enthusiastic pursuit of vengeance for Þorgeirr, having gone to lengths which might seem unreasonable to the modern reader were it not

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70. For the paroemial texts in internal quotation, see TPMA 3:41 and 11:55, respectively.

that he undertook these projects at the insistence of his king, whose wishes are just. “It will be a long time before the ground you have scorched begins to grow again” (*Seint mun sá díli gróa, er þú hefir þar brennt*),<sup>71</sup> says the monarch, echoing the phrasing of an immediately preceding boasting-verse by Þormóðr and thus signaling his approval of this exaggeratedly extended spate of bloody vengeance.

A final demonstration of King Óláfr’s divinely derived power to decide matters is clearly expressed in the last scenes of the saga, where asking why his faithful skald has become despondent, he is told, “Because, my Lord, I am not certain that we shall be resting in the same place tonight. Promise me now that we shall be and I will be glad” (*Því, herra, at mér þykkir eigi víst vera, at vit munum til einnar gistingar í kveld. Nú ef þú heitr mér því, at vit munim til einnar gistingar báðir, þá mun ek glaðr*).<sup>72</sup> The king reassures him, “I don’t know whether it is within my power to decide, but if it is, then tonight you shall go where I go” (*Eigi veit ek, hvárt mín ráð megu um þat til leiðar koma, en ef ek má nokkuru um ráða, þá muntu þangat fara í kveld, sem ek fer*).<sup>73</sup> When Óláfr is struck and dies in battle, Þormóðr grieves for himself, surviving his king: “Since I shall not be resting in the same place as the king tonight, living seems worse than dying” (*Þat ætla ek nú, at eigi muna ek til þeirar gistingar, sem konungr í kveld, en verra þykki mér nú at lifa en deyja*).<sup>74</sup> But at that moment, “an arrow flew towards him and struck him in the chest. He knew not whence it came” (*er hann mælti þetta, þá fló or at Þormóði ok kom fyrir brjóst honum, ok vissi hann eigi, hvaðan at kom*).<sup>75</sup> The episode is lengthened in Flateyjarbók, where the disappointed poet prays to the newly dead king, “Will you not, King Olaf, grant me the end you promised? You said you would not forsake me, if it were within your power” (*Hvárt muntu nú, inn heilagi Óláfr konungr, eigi ætla at enda við mik þat, sem þú hézt mér, at þú myndir mik*

71. CSI 2:392; ÍF 6:260, ch. 24. For a discussion of the proverbial phrase “Brenna e-m dila,” see Halldór Halldórsson, *Íslensk orðtök* (Reykjavík: Ísafoldarprentsmiðja, 1954), 151–52 and 156, as well as Halldór Halldórsson, *Íslenskt Orðtakasafn*, 2 vols. (Reykjavík: Almenna bókafélagið, 1968–69), 2:109, s.v. “díli.”

72. CSI 2:392; ÍF 6:263, ch. 24.

73. CSI 2:392; ÍF 6:263–64, ch. 24.

74. CSI 2:393; ÍF 6:268–69, ch. 24.

75. CSI 2:393; ÍF 6:269, ch. 24.

*eigi fyrir róða láta, ef þín ráð mætti standa?*).<sup>76</sup> And he rejoices at the subsequent shot, “very pleased at being wounded thus” (*þessu sári feginn harla*). Miraculously, his end is certain, and King Óláfr’s *ráð* has proven consonant with that of *inn ríkri*, in this case God himself.

## 10

The moral contrast of the two heroes of *Fóstbræðra saga* in the respective conduct of their lives, clearly delineated by Meulengracht Sørensen, is elucidated and informed by our recognition of the underlying proverbial allusion suggested at those moments in the text I have touched upon above. That “drama of the will” described by Robert Cook and present in many of the *Íslendingasögur*—and which indeed must have been essential to competitive social interactions from the very foundation of Icelandic culture—is epitomized and examined from a Christian theological point of view by the composer, or one of the composers, of *Fóstbræðra*. It is in addition significant that in the portion of the narrative that could be specified as *Porgeirs saga* the proverbial sub-text, more urgently operative, is more frequently alluded to than in the portion devoted to Þormóðr. Of the two, Porgeirr is the spiritual *ógæfumaðr*, his will unrestrained and eventually in conflict with the Divine Will Itself. This conflict is what is examined in his story. Þormóðr, by contrast, in subjecting his will to that of the divinely appointed King Óláfr, thus exercises his Free Will by applying the extraordinary powers given him in accordance with the intentions of the Giver, or at least not in direct opposition to them.

A drama of the will similar to that which Cook noticed in the *Íslendingasögur*, and whose expression has significant phraseological similarities to the text of *Fóstbræðra saga*, is found in *Sverris saga*. The date of this work is more certain than that of the former saga, but its composership is also much debated and with some textual indications as well as external evidence of there having been more than one writer at work. A portion of it was composed, according to internal evidence, by Abbot Karl Jónsson while “King Sverrir himself sat over him and decided what should be written” (*en yfir*

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76. CSI 2:399; ÍF 6:269, ch. 24.



*sat sjálfir Sverrir konungr ok réð fyrir hvat rita skyldi*).<sup>77</sup> Its first task is to trace the journey to the throne of this obscure Norwegian son of one Gunnhildr and a comb-maker or smith, born around 1150 and sent to the Faroes at the age of 5 to be fostered and trained for the priesthood by a paternal uncle, Hrói, Bishop of Kirkjunes. His illegitimate royal paternity as a son of King Sigurðr munnr revealed to him by his mother in 1176, he gives up the priestly calling for kingly aspirations, a decision recalled disparagingly by the Church in later conflicts between it and the throne. Calling him a *guðníðingr*, or “a traitor to God, a renegade” (CV 219b), that institution sought to neutralize his authority by asserting that as an ordained priest he should never have undertaken the secular office of kingship, let alone given up his sacerdotal duties. Whatever the genealogical validity of his claim to the Norwegian throne, he had discarded prior and more urgent spiritual commitments.

It is in the light of such ideologically based opposition to his kingship that we may consider one of his several dreams reported as justification of his seeking the crown with divine approval. In chapter 42, on the night preceding the Battle of Kalvskinnet, near Niðaróss, in 1179, where Erlingr skakki jarl was to die, a man leads Sverrir to a roasted male human corpse and tells him to eat. Regarding the meal as unclean, the hero demures, but the dream man commands him to obey, for it is God’s will: “You will eat and you shall eat; *thus wills he who decides all*” (*Pú vilt eta ok þú skalt eta; svá vill sá er öllu ræðr*).<sup>78</sup> In deference to this superior will, he begins “to eat the flesh from the bones, and every mouthful seemed difficult to swallow. But the longer he ate, the less disgust he seemed to feel at eating the remainder. Coming to the head, he was about to eat it also; but the man who had led him there told him to cease eating, and took the head himself” (*eta holdit af beinunum ok þótti hverr biti tregt niðr ganga. Ok svá lengi sem hann hafði etit þá þótti honum því minna fyrir er ofarr var. En er hann kom at höfðinu vildi hann þá ok eta þat. Ok sá maðr er hann leiddi þangat tók höfuðit til sín ok kvað þá*

77. J. Sephton, trans., *The Saga of King Sverri of Norway*, Northern Library 4 (London: David Nutt, 1899), henceforth Sephton, 1; *Sverris saga*, ed. Þorleifur Hauksson, Íslenzk fornrit 30 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2007), 3 (“Prologus”).

78. Sephton 53; ÍF 30:66, ch. 42. For discussion of Sverrir’s dreams, see Lars Lönnroth, “Sverrir’s Dreams,” *Scripta Islandica: Isländska Sällskapets Årsbok* 57 (2006): 97–110.

*hætta skyldu*).<sup>79</sup> In Sverrir's interpretation, this dream anticipated the death in battle of Erlingr jarl and his most powerful barons, but also the escape of King Magnús, the leftover roasted head which he was instructed to leave uneaten. This passage is most meaningfully interpreted in the context of a proverbial allusion established in the reference to God as one who rules, or decides, all. Thus, Sverrir would contend, he has undertaken the pursuit of monarchy in deference to God's Will rather than following his own desires. At the same time as the dream admits Sverrir's joy in conquest, it also supports his contention that he was not, at least by intention, a *guðníðingr* but rather an initially reluctant follower of God's overwhelming Will, a point which is made often through the course of his biography, allusively using the force of the proverb whose literary significance is the subject of this essay.

On numerous occasions the piety of the king—who himself pauses to pray at precarious moments in battle, admonishes his soldiers to pray for the souls of those they have killed, and who grants clemency to even vaguely repentent enemies—is made indisputably clear. No matter what accusations the Church leveled against its renegade son, his biography asserts his faithful adherence, unusual among leaders of his time, to the moral demands of Christian teaching in his behavior. On his deathbed in 1202 he is reported to have observed, “The kingdom has brought me labour and unrest and trouble, rather than peace and a quiet life. But so it is that many have envied me my rank, and have let their envy grow to full enmity. May God forgive them all; and let my Lord now judge between me and them, and decide all my cause” (*Hefi ek meira starf, ófrið ok vandræði haft í ríkinu en kyrrsæti eðr mikit bóglífi. Er svá at minni virðingu sem margir hafi verit mínir ofundarmenn, þeir er þat hafa látit ganga fyrir fullan fjándskap við mik, sem nú fyrirgefi Guð þeim þat öllum. Ok dæmi Guð milli vár ok allt mitt mál*).<sup>80</sup> Even at his death, as he contemplated the many voices dubious of his paternal right to the throne, he left the question in the hands of “sá er öllu ræðr” (he who decides all).

Concomitant with what were meant to be viewed as signs of respect for his training and faith, however, readers notice the presence of a dark and malicious humor, whether emanating from the hand of the

79. Sephton 53; ÍF 30:66, ch. 42.

80. Sephton 231–2; ÍF 30:279, ch. 180.

nebulous biographer or represented by him as coming from the king's own mouth, or perhaps resulting from the collaborative dynamic of king and abbot in recounting the adventure. This humor had to do in every instance with that unavoidably prolonged exercise of power to obtain and keep his kingship that had taken up so much of his life and to which he alluded on his deathbed. The very titling of the earlier portion of his saga, the account of his ascent to power, *Grýla*, after the mythical monster, a traditional personified embodiment of that which threatens accepted social order, perhaps even the order of the pre-Christian universe, casts a viciously humorous perspective upon his long journey to power as it is described there.<sup>81</sup> Humorous references to the overwhelming effect of his assaults upon his enemies stress their aggressive nature to the point of their being troll-like. On three occasions the threat of the Birkibeinar is compared to that of “trolls at the door,” or “between outhouse and home,” emphasizing the chaotically destructive potential of the insurgent forces. Interestingly, the phrase, “troll fyrir durum,” rarely occurring elsewhere in Old Icelandic literature, is found twice in *Fóstbræðra saga*. It is used of Grettir's depredations upon the Ísafjörðr countryside in chapter 1, though not found in the corresponding chapter 52 of *Grettis saga* itself, and it appears also in chapter 9, where Þórdís' mother, Gríma, complains to Þormóðr of his importunate attentions to her daughter, saying that he may frighten more serious suitors away: “it's just that any man who might be thinking about proposing marriage to her will regard you as a troll on his doorstep” (*þeir menn, er til hafa gork at biðja hennar . . . má vera, at þeim sýnisk troll standa fyrir durum, þar sem þú ert*).<sup>82</sup>

The exercise of power in association with God's gift of Free Will, of primary concern in *Fóstbræðra saga*, is thus also a matter of interest in *Sverris saga*, one of whose composers at least means to represent the priestly usurper's ascendance as the result of God's Will. In addition, such striking phraseological similarities between the two texts, as well as their stylistic sharing of a humor derived from situations of violence, might lead us to consider whether they share also, at some point

81. For useful information on *Grýla* see “Tröll og forynjur—Grýla,” in Árni Björnsson, *Jól á Íslandi* (Reykjavík: Ísafold, 1963), 139–46, and more recently Terry Gunnell, “Grýla, Grýlur, ‘Grøleks’ and Skeklers: Medieval Disguise Traditions in the North Atlantic?” *Arv: Nordic Yearbook of Folklore* 57 (2001): 33–54.

82. CSI 2:349; ÍF 7:161, ch. 9.



in their respective literary development, a common compositional hand. While this is not the place for a detailed study of such matters, it is interesting to recall the connections of Abbot Karl Jónsson to Þingeyraklaustur as well as the conjecture of Guðni Jónsson, in an admittedly earlier critical era, that *Fóstbræðra* “was probably written more than one time by the monks of Þingeyraklaustur between 1210 and 1380.”<sup>83</sup> The composition of both works was imbued at some point with a transcendent spiritual vision of the ultimate source of the power to decide—that wielded by “sá er ǫllu ræðr.”

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83. “Líklega hefir . . . verið skrifuð upp oftar en einu sinni af Þingeyramunkum milli 1210 og 1380” (ÍF 6:lxv-lxxvi).

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## Appendix

### Textual Data on the Proverb

#### “Jafnan segir inn ríkri ráð”

(The more powerful always decides)

The items assembled below attest in a compact fashion to the prevalence of the idea of the proverb “Jafnan segir inn ríkri ráð” in the medieval North. They are drawn from some of the philological tools available to those who might wish to undertake further paroemial studies of the Old-Norse Icelandic sagas. A key to the abbreviations employed by their various editors, as well as supplemental bibliography when more recent editions are available, is provided in footnotes. Explicit witnesses to oral paroemial tradition such as these likely constitute—like the extant narratives in which they are attested—only a minimal portion of the communal repositories of those societies from which they survive.



### Excerpts from Collections Used

1. Bjarni Vilhjálmsson and Óskar Halldórsson, *Íslenzkir málshættir*, 2nd ed. (Reykjavík: Almenna bókafélagið, 1982), 268:

*ríkur*: jafnan segir enn ríkri ráð (*Málsháttakvæði*); ríkari verður að ráða (FJ); hinn ríkari verður ráð að segja (*Eimreiðin* 10. árg. 1904).<sup>1</sup>

2. Finnur Jónsson, “Oldislandske ordsprog og talemåder,” *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 30 (1913–14): proverb headword 334, p. 181:

ríkr (jfr heima): *jafnan segir enn ríkri ráð* (Mhk 23; jfr *Eirspennill* 47); “Altid er det den mægtigste (af to), der giver råd (med myndighed), hvis ikke *segja ráð* her er en blot omskrivning for *ráða* ‘råde.’ Det samme findes i prosa således: *hinn ríkari verður [raað] at segja* (Clár ch. 15, lines 45–46). Sammenhængen her taler bestemt for den sidst anførte opfattelse. = GJ 276: *Ríkari verður (blýtr) að ráða*.<sup>2</sup>

3. TPMA 4:460, s.u. “Gewalt”:

1. Der Mächtigere entscheidet (setzt seinen Willen durch). Nordic: *En sá réð, es ríkri vas* Aber derjenige entschied, der mächtiger war (Sólarljóð 36, 4 = Gering p. 11). *Jafnan segir enn ríkri ráð* Immer sagt der Mächtigere, was zu tun ist (wörtl.: “die Beschlüsse”) (*Málsháttakvæði* 23, 1 = Jónsson, Arkiv 334; Jónsson 137). *Stare penes libitum satagit vis celsa quiritem*—*Ee wil waaldh sijn wilix hæffwæ* Die hohe

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1. *Málsháttakvæði* = Finnur Jónsson, ed., *Den norsk-isländske skjaldedigtning*, vols. B1–2, Rettet tekst (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1912–15), B2:138–145 [also Kock, ed., *Den norsk-isländske skaldediktningen*, 2 vols. (Lund: Gleerup, 1946–49), 2:73–78]; FJ = Finnur Jónsson, *Íslenskt málsháttasafn* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1920); *Eimreiðin* = “Íslenzkir málshættir og talshættir,” *Eimreiðin* 10 (1904): 138–144.

2. Mhk = *Málsháttakvæði* (see previous note); *Eirspennill* = Finnur Jónsson, ed. *Eirspennill* (AM 47 Fol) (Christiania [Oslo]: Den Norske Historiske Kildeskriftkommission, 1913); Clár 15 = *Clarus saga*, *Clari fabella*, ed. Gustaf Cederschiöld (Lund: Gleerup, 1879) [also vol. 5 of *Riddarasögur*, ed. Bjarni Vilhjálmsson (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnautgáfan, 1949–1954), ch. 15, p. 38; Dennis Farrell Keeney, *Clarus saga: An Edition and Translation* (Ph.D. diss., University of Mississippi, 1990), ch. 15, p. 82]; GJ = Guðmundur Jónsson, *Safn af íslenzkum orðskviðum, fornælum, heilræðum, snilliyrðum, sannmælum og málsgreinum, samanlesið of í stafrófsröð sett af Guðmundi Jónssyni prófasti í Snæfellsnessýslu og prest í Staðarstaðarsókn* (Copenhagen: Hið íslenska bókmentafélag, 1830).

Gewalt der Quiriten will bei ihrer Willkür verharren—Gewalt will immer ihren Willen haben (Låle 1017). *Hinn ríkari verðr ráð at segja* Der Mächtigere kann sagen, was zu tun ist (wörtl.: “den Beschluss”) (Clári saga 15, 5 = Jónsson, Arkiv 334).<sup>3</sup>

The prevalence of the concepts underlying the proverb “Jafnan segir inn ríkri ráð” is suggested by a related one, Dýrt er drottins orð (The master’s word is final [lit. “dear”]):

1. Finnur Jónsson, *Íslenskt málsháttasafn* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1920), proverb word 74, p. 76:

dróttinn—dýrt er (mun verða; láta menn) dróttins orð Laxd 182, Bisk 1:484, 803, 2:51, Fms 2:269, 4:175, Isls 2:445, Alex 128 (honum væri dýrt látanda d. o.), DraumJ. 5, Mhk. 5.<sup>4</sup>

3. Sólarljóð = Finnur Jónsson, ed., *Den norsk-isländske skjaldedigtning*, B1:635–648 [also Ernst A. Kock, ed., *Den norsk-isländske skjaldedigtning*, 1:308–16]; Hugo Gering, “Altnordische Sprichwörter und sprichwörtliche Redensarten: eine nachlese zu *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 30, 61ff., 170ff.,” *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 32 (1915–16): 1–30 [also Margaret Clunies Ross, ed., *Poetry on Christian Subjects*, 1: *The Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries*, Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages 7 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 319]; Málsháttakvæði = see note 1 above; Jónsson, Arkiv = “Oldislandske ordsprog og talemåder,” *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 30 (1913–14): 61–111, 170–217; Jónsson = Finnur Jónsson, *Íslenskt málsháttasafn* (see note 1 above); Låle = Peder Låle, “Forndanska och latinska ordspråk,” vol. 1 of *Östnordiska och latinska medeltidsordspråk: Peder Låles ordspråk och en motsvarande svensk samling*, ed. Axel Kock and Carl af Petersens (Copenhagen: Samfund til udgivelse af gammel nordisk litteratur, 1889–94), 3–250; Clári saga = G. Cederschiöld, ed., *Clári saga*, Altnordische Saga-Bibliothek 12 (Halle: Niemeyer, 1907).

4. Laxd 182 = [edition unknown; see ÍF 5:147 (ch. 47)]; Bisk 1:484, 803, 2:51; Jón Sigurðsson and Guðbrandur Vífússon, eds. *Biskupa sögur*, 2 vols. (Copenhagen: Hið íslenzka bókmentafélag, 1858) [for *Lárentíus saga biskups* (1:803), see also *Biskupa sögur*, vol. 3, ed. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, Íslenzk fornrit 17 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1998), 248]; Fms 2:269 = *Saga Ólafs konungs Tryggvasonar*, in vol 2. of *Fornmanna sögur*, ed. S. Egilsson and Þ. Guðmundsson (Copenhagen: Popp, 1826); Fms 4:175 [*sagði þeim ráðinn sigrinn*] = *Saga Ólafs konungs hins Helga*, in *Fornmanna sögur*, vol. 4, ed. Þorgeir Guðmundsson, C. C. Rafn, et al (Copenhagen: Popp, 1829) [also *Heimskringla*, vol. 2, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslenzk fornrit 27 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag), 126]; Isls 2:445 = *Kjalnesínga saga*, in Jón Sigurðsson, C. C. Rafn, et al., eds., *Íslendinga sögur*, 4 vols. (Copenhagen: Möller, 1843–89); Alex 128 = *Alexanders saga*, ed. C. R. Unger (Christiania [Oslo]: Feilberg & Landmark, 1848) [also *Alexandreis, það er, Alexanders saga á íslensku* (Reykjavík: Steinholt, 2002), p. 149, lines 4–5]; DraumJ. 5 = *Drauma-Jóns saga*, ed. Hugo Gering (Halle: Buchhandlung des Waisenhauses, 1893) [also vol. 6 of *Riddarasögur*, ed. Bjarni Vilhjálmsson (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1949–1954), ch. 5, p. 164]; Mhk. = *Málsháttakvæði* (see previous note).

2. TPMA 6:41–42, s.v. “Herr”:

5. Eigenschaften des Herrschers 5.1. Der Herr hat Macht und Autorität  
5.1.3. Die Worte des Herrn haben Gewicht 5.1.3.1. Die Worte des  
Herrn gelten viel

Nordic: *Dýrt er drottins orð* Das Wort des Herrn ist viel wert (Snorri, Ólafs saga helga 82 → Fms 4, 175 [= Jónsson, Arkiv 74]; Snorri, Heimskringla 248, 36 [Ólafs saga helga 85], 356, 13 [Ólafs saga helga 165]; Grosse Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar 235 → Fms 2, 269 [= Jónsson, Arkiv 74]; Biskupasögur 1:484, 803, 2:51 [→ Jónsson, Arkiv 74]; Drauma-Jóns saga ch. 5, lines 48–49, ca. first half of the 14th century [→ ZfdPh 26, 304 = Jónsson, Arkiv 74]; Kjálnesinga saga ch. 15, p. 35. *Dýrt láta menn dróttins orð* Man bezeichnet das Wort des Herrn als etwas Kostbares (*Málsháttakvæði* 5, 5 = Jónsson, Arkiv 74; Jónsson 31). *Dýrt mun mér verða dróttins orð* Das Wort des Herrn soll mir gewichtig sein (Laxdæla saga ch. 19, p. 47 = Jónsson, Arkiv 74. Jónsson 31). *At honum vere sem auðrom dyrt latanda drottins orð* Dass das Wort des Herrn für ihn ebensoviel bedeute wie für einen andern (Alexanders saga 128 = Jónsson, Arkiv 74). *Jussio suevit hero celsi sublimis haberi*—*Hóyt ær herræ buðh* Der Befehl eines hohen Herrn wird gewöhnlich hochgehalten—Hoch steht (wörtl.: “ist”) das Gebot eines Herrn (Låle, p. 58, no. 521).<sup>5</sup>

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5. Snorri, Ólafs saga helga = Snorri Sturluson *Ólafs saga hins helga*, ed. P. A. Munch and C. R. Unger (Christiania [Oslo]: Werner, 1853); Fms = see previous note; Heimskringla = Fms 4 (see previous note); Grosse Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar = O. A. Johnsen and J. Helgason, eds., *Den store saga om Olav den hellige* (Oslo: Kjelteskriftfondet, 1930–41); Biskupasögur 2 = see “Bisk” in previous note; Drauma-Jóns saga = see “Draumj” in previous note; ZfdPh = *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie* 26 (1894): 289–308 [edition of *Drauma-Jóns saga*]; Kjálnesinga saga = *Kjálnesinga saga*, ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson, Íslenzk fornrit 14 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1959) [see also previous note]; *Málsháttakvæði* (see note 1 above); Laxdæla saga = K. Kálund, ed. *Laxdæla saga*, Altnordische Saga-Bibliothek 4 (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1896) [also Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed, Íslenzk fornrit 5 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1934)]; Alexanders saga = see previous note [also Finnur Jónsson, ed., *Alexanders saga: Islandsk Oversættelse ved Brandr Jónsson* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1925); Jón Helgason, ed., *Alexanders saga: The Arnarnagmæan Manuscript 519a, 4to*, Manuscripta Islandica (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1966)]; Låle = see note 3 above.



